

“To Care for One Another”

Foot washing is a fairly foreign concept for United Methodists. Rarely do we engage in such services. I have been involved in two, one when I was on a college retreat, and another when I was on a retreat in April 2016 with other elders and deacons who were to be ordained that summer. It is a very special and moving service but something that few have experienced. During tonight’s service my goal is to help you understand how it symbolizes and shows the care we need to have for each other.

To put foot washing in context we must go back to the culture of Palestine in the first century. People, even the wealthy, got around mainly by walking. The terrain was dusty. People wore sandals without socks or garments. When they returned home, their feet were dusty and needed to be washed. In the homes of most persons there was a wash basin right at the door, and most people just washed their own feet. The rich and royalty, though, had their feet washed by their servants.

John’s Gospel foot washing takes the same place as communion in the synoptic gospels. Foot washing is John’s vision of communion, only this time acted out among the vulnerability of human bodies. Jesus interrupts a shared meal to wash the feet of his friends. When he pours out the water on the disciples’ feet,

Jesus displays a form of love that reorders social roles. Taking a basin and towel, removing his outer garment, Jesus kneels and enacts the role of a subordinate, a slave, a servant. He offers to each of the disciples an act of hospitality. In his life he performs for them what their future lives will be---to defy the social protocols of the day, in which those of lower status serve those above. Peter's refusal ("You will never wash my feet") tells us how shocking Jesus' actions were to his gathered students. The teacher does not wash the feet of the pupil, nor the master the feet of the slave.

Peter is the disciple who constantly has to learn. He is the example for us as disciples today. We can understand Peter's uneasiness with the loss of security that comes with seeing Jesus kneel before him. Jesus is his teacher, his master, his king. Jesus is not supposed to wash his feet, to serve him. Peter has struggled all along with the Lion of Judah as a lamb who is slain. He has struggled to see how the one who silences storms and feeds thousands and heals the sick could possibly die. Peter does not yet understand that Jesus refuses to offer the security of a king. Maybe this is part of the reason that Peter denied Jesus when he was arrested, that he could not face the fact that the king he had envisioned who would rule on earth would in fact have to die.

Jesus' invitation into foot washing is not a momentary act of hospitality.

Foot washing is a form of life rooted in the upheaval of societal expectations around leadership and status. Jesus means for Peter to die to myths of honor and power. This is not an isolated action; it's the start of a new life. Jesus gives the disciples a command: "For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." The disciples were to wash each other's feet, to care for each other, without regard to status.

Peter's objections point to problems we have today. Many times we have problems in letting others serve us. We do not think we are worthy to be served, yet Jesus teaches that we are. On the other hand, we often fail to serve others as we should, especially when we fail to consider who is our neighbor and who we should serve. The lesson from foot washing is we need to be aware of all whom we can serve and to do it.

At the time of the foot washing, Peter also did not have the full context of what it meant to sacrifice. Even before Peter's objection, Jesus offered these words: "You do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand." Biblical scholar Marianne Meye Thompson explains that knowledge after the fact is a familiar phenomenon in John. To understand an encounter with Jesus often requires insight from the Bible, or the presence of the Holy Spirit, or the revelation

of the resurrection. Only Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross can make sense of foot washing, Thompson reminds us. Only then will Peter make the connection between this act of care and what it means for him. Thompson writes that "foot washing and crucifixion become mutually interpretive."

In a recent issue of the *Christian Century* magazine, Rev. Melissa Florer-Bisler, of Raleigh Mennonite Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, writes of a modern day version of how foot washing applies in a community where people take care of each other's physical needs. In L'Arche communities around the world, foot washing is a central celebration of common life. During Holy Week and throughout the year, people who live together in homes in India, Bethlehem, Iowa, Toronto, France and Uganda gather as Jesus did with his disciples. In living rooms and church basements, these community members pour water onto one another's feet and gently blot wet toes with towels.

This should be not surprise due to the spirituality of L'Arche. After all, in the international federation of homes for people with and without intellectual disabilities, physical care for bodies is extended and received routinely---bathing, dressing, cutting up food, brushing the teeth of others.

Rev. Florer-Bixler herself served for a time at a L'Arche community and had a conversation with an Irish nun who had served for a number of years as an

assistant in another community. She had spent her days in the gentle and careful persistence of love that is care for the physical needs of another. One day Rev. Florer-Bixler asked her if she had ever thought of becoming a L'Arche house leader or community leader. It was assumed that she would want to move up and plan logistics or strategize a vision for her community. After endlessly brushing teeth and driving others to medical appointments, it seemed logical that the nun would follow the natural progression of moving into a leadership role in the community.

In response to Rev. Florer-Bixler's question about her moving into an administrative position, the nun answered: "I'm quite happy as I am," she told me with a smile. "I don't want to do anything." What a great testament. To serve others in the moment and not be expecting a promotion. To have no agenda. To be content with the service offered to others. This is the lesson for us today, although in many ways Latimer and its members have already served each other as taught by Jesus. Sara Blackwell's taking people to their medical appointments, even all the way to Duke University. The serving of dinners to veterans at Richard Campbell. And, even more recently, Glenda Conley and Yvonne Shirley being with another member in her time of need.

We will not have a foot washing tonight. But in closing we understand what it means. It is a powerful sacrament of renewed commitment to give and receive the parts of us we want to hide from one another. Foot washing, like communion, is to receive an invitation into new life, new community, the firm foundation that extends from the cross into the eternity of God's love.